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ABSTRACT

A program of carefully controlled and guided writing can be an effective tool to help English as a second language (ESL) students overcome the difficulties they still have with basic English structure, as well as to expand their linguistic boundaries. Tailored to the needs and problems of adult immigrants reading at a level between grades 4 and 6, the program content focuses on features occurring in everyday language. Two basic types of composition are practiced throughout the 16-week course: rewriting a model passage and writing a precis. The term "controlled" is used to describe the kind of composition produced by following very specific instructions. Students rewrite model passages of from 200 to 300 words, making certain modifications specified in the instructions, and they produce precis from short passages by answering a series of specific comprehension questions designed to elicit simple, compound, and complex sentences. Exercises at the sentence level, such as expanding and combining sentences, ease ESL learners into the writing of continuous prose. Finally, guided composition leads ESL learners to the paragraph level so that they will be able to write a unified piece of continuous prose that conveys information in acceptable English. Its four steps involve sentence level writing, oral preparation, actual writing of the assignment, and correction of errors and rewriting. (JL)

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WRITING AS AN EFFECTIVE LEARNING TOOL

BY

ELOAH F. GIACOMELLI

WRITING: WHAT FOR?

Because writing is essentially language in slow motion, it is an ideal medium to provide ESL learners at the upper intermediate levels with a close-up view of language in action. When well-integrated with at least one of the other language skills, writing can be used as an effective tool to help ESL students overcome the difficulties they still have with basic English structure, as well as to expand their linguistic boundaries.

To be effective as a learning tool, however, writing assignments have to be carefully selected, directed, and then put into practice regularly, methodically and consistently over an extended period of time. In this way, controlled and guided writing can be used to focus the learners' attention on four points:

1. the basic unit of the sentence (the word, the phrase, the clause -- and their position within the English sentence);
2. the basic structure of the clause ([Qualifying Phrase] - Subject - Verb - Object - [Qualifying Phrase]*

* Square brackets indicate a deletable item.

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3. the relation of modifiers to words modified within the clause;
4. the work of the "cementing" words (conjunctions, prepositions, transitional words or phrases).

The sentence is the fundamental unit of discourse, that is, of connected speech or writing consisting of more than one utterance; ESL learners cannot communicate adequately in English, except on a rudimentary level, if they do not have a firm grasp of the structure of the English sentence. Likewise, communication remains at a rudimentary level if the learners lack the ability to coordinate and subordinate ideas in the sentence. It is easy to see why it is counterproductive to ask such learners to produce a piece of "free" writing. For instead of trying to communicate in English within their still narrow linguistic boundaries, these learners will think about the composition topic in their native language and then make a literal translation of their thoughts into what they think is English. The result is fractured and perhaps unintelligible English, frustrating for students and teachers.

I believe that one realistic solution to this frustrating problem lies in providing ESL students with frequent and regular practice in carefully controlled and guided writing, rather than in asking them to produce free writing before they are ready to do so. (The terms controlled and guided will be clarified later in this paper.) Years of teaching experience have also demonstrated that with students at the upper intermediate levels, writing is best used primarily as a means to an end -- in other words, as a second language learning tool to help them come to grips with the structure of their new language.

What follows is an account of how I attempted to incorporate these principles into a writing program that I developed for an upper intermediate course, offered at King Edward Campus, Vancouver Community College, in British Columbia.

Before I could devise such a program, though, a few preliminary steps had to be taken. For this reason, my attention as an ESL teacher

has been focused on identifying and classifying the problem areas and the most common types of errors found in the writing of upper intermediate students at King Edward Campus so that lessons and exercises could be devised to reduce or even prevent such errors.

GENERAL AIMS OF THE PROGRAM

The preliminary steps mentioned above revealed the need for a carefully designed writing program with built-in redundancy which would

A) be tailored to the specific English language problems and needs of the intended learners as well as to the particular format of the course -- 16-week terms with five hours of classroom instruction per week devoted to writing skills;

B) take into account the irregular attendance of those students who are shift-workers, or who work overtime, or who are absent for various other reasons; those students who come into the program after it has started; the fact that many students are slow to learn and need more repetitive practice; the fact that many students do not use English outside the classroom and therefore need extra reinforcement in the form of review work.

Moreover, the program should help the intended learners to

- overcome their present English language problems and difficulties;
- express themselves in idiomatic English to communicate relevant information on WHO/WHAT/WHERE/WHEN/WHY/HOW;
- catch up on work they have missed because of absence or late enrollment;
- acquire fluency in writing through repetitive practice of the selected aspects of language;
- expand their linguistic boundaries.

THE INTENDED LEARNERS

The intended learners are adult immigrants with a reading comprehension ranging from a Grade 4 to a Grade 6 Average Reading Level as measured by the Gates Mac-Ginitie Reading Test - Survey E. In our English Language Training Department, these ESL learners normally attend the upper intermediate or lower advanced levels. They have been taught the following basic structures: parts of speech; use of verb tenses; modals; active and passive voices; adjective, noun, and adverbial clauses; gerund and participial phrases.

Typical problem areas in the writing produced by the intended learners include:

- Erratic punctuation and capitalization
- No paragraph indentation
- Errors in sequence of tenses
- Faulty reference of pronouns
- Faulty subject-verb agreement
- Sentences and/or clauses with no verb or no subject
- Errors in word order
- Absence and/or misuse of the "cementing" words (conjunctions, prepositions, transitional words)
- Absence and/or misuse of articles
- Lack of coordination and subordination within the sentence and paragraph
- Run-on sentences
- Incoherence due to wrong word order, wrong choice of word, literal translation from the mother-tongue
- Errors in the use of common English idioms such as two-word verbs, be + adjective + preposition patterns
- Inability to produce a unified piece of continuous prose in acceptable English

The intended learners' problems with the basic structure of the English sentence lie not only at the production but also at the recognition level, as is clearly revealed in a random sample taken from a final exam for upper intermediate students given in December 1979. Consider, for example, the following sentence:

> "... As our cities grew outward, peole (who, living, lived) far from the center of town needed (more, lots, a) places to shop."

Of the 160 upper intermediate students who took the exam, 7.4% chose who, 36.2% chose living, and 56.2% chose lived as the correct answer. Over half of those students were unable to detect which missing component would make that sentence structurally sound.

OUTLINE OF THE CONTENT

The writing program that I have developed aims at directing the learners' attention to the basic components of the English clause/sentence, as well as at providing regular and frequent practice in the use of those selected aspects of language needed to convey information on WHO/WHAT/WHERE/WHEN/WHY/HOW in a unified piece of continuous prose. I see the five W's and the H as the basis for the content of the discourse to be produced in upper intermediate courses. Also, by practising language in slow motion under the form of writing, the learners get a close-up view of those components that are part and parcel of the English sentence as well as of the way they fit together.

The following tables outline the selected aspects of language needed to deal linguistically with the content mentioned above.

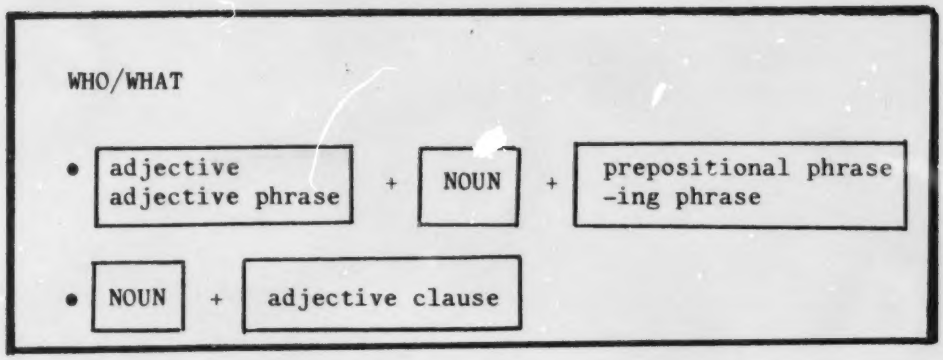

TABLE 1

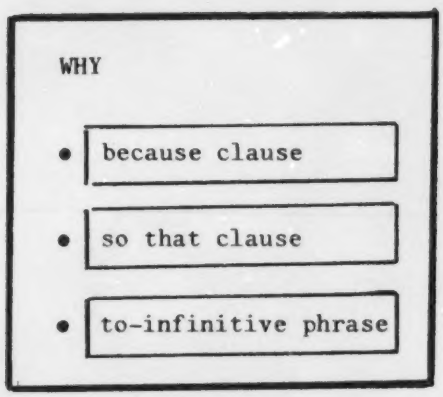

TABLE 2

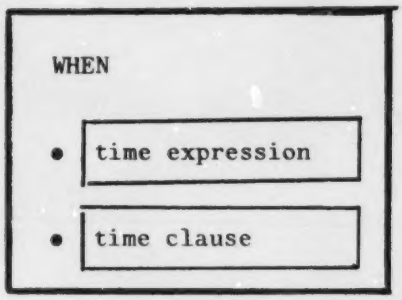

TABLE 3

Because these features occur regularly in everyday language, I have placed them at the core of my program. This fact does not mean that other important language features, such as reporting speech, expressing conditions and contrasts, etc., are completely excluded. This framing and focusing, which are essential to give the observer a close-up view of something, always narrow down a field, of course. My choice was also based on the fact that although the features outlined in tables 1, 2 and 3 above have high frequency, the intended learners do not use them accurately and fluently in their connected speech.

Throughout the 16-week course, the students practise these language features in various types of composition. At this point, I would like to clarify what I mean by composition. Derived from the Latin componere, "to put together," composition means "the formation of a whole, especially

by different things being put together; the ordering or arranging of something into proper proportion or relation." (Webster's Third International Dictionary)

The intended learners are still struggling with "the ordering or arranging of words into proper proportion or relation" necessary to form "a whole" -- be it a sentence, a paragraph, or a unified piece of continuous prose -- that communicates information on WHO/WHAT/WHERE/WHEN/WHY/HOW in acceptable English. In order to help them overcome these difficulties, two basic types of composition are practiced throughout the 16-week course: rewriting a model passage and writing a précis. In addition, the students practice guided writing at the sentence level, with exercises consisting of expanding "skeleton" sentences and combining several sentences into one. Longer pieces of guided writing are not introduced until the fifth or sixth week of the course, depending on the students' performance in the two basic types of composition.

CONTROLLED COMPOSITION

The term controlled is used to describe the kind of composition produced by following very specific instructions, step by step. The students are given no choice of what and of how to write because the content (the what) is supplied by a given text, and the form (the how), by detailed instructions that must be strictly adhered to, thereby leaving the students one only possible course of action. Rewriting a model passage and writing a précis with the help of specific questions are two basic types of controlled composition.

Rewriting a Model Passage

The students are given a model passage, usually 200-300 words long, and are asked to rewrite it, making certain modifications or transformations which are specified in the instructions.

Rewriting a model passage is a good way to familiarize the students

with the mechanics of writing (punctuation, capitalization, margins, spacing, titles, paragraph indentation), to make them review basic structures, to make them pay close attention to linguistic details and the interaction of the various sentence components, and to introduce them to the practice of writing continuous prose. This exercise should occur regularly throughout the course, and frequently during the first three weeks, together with compositions at the sentence level and précis writing.

In textbooks which use model passages for rewriting, the transformations and modifications, which include negative statements, reference of pronouns, subject-verb agreement, verb tenses, active and passive voices, and reported speech, are usually graduated into several dozen steps, each step involving a higher degree of difficulty or complexity.

Writing a précis

The students are asked to read a passage about 150-250 words long, and then answer a series of specific comprehension questions, which are designed to elicit simple, compound, and complex sentences. The connectors and/or phrases needed to join the answers are given in parenthesis after the questions. By putting all the answers together in the form of complete sentences ([Qualifying Phrase] - Subject - Verb - Object - [Qualifying Phrase]), the students will have a précis or summary of the passage read. As in rewriting a model passage, only one course of action is possible in précis writing. This fact also makes marking a much easier task for the teacher.

Précis writing should occur regularly throughout the 16-week course because it not only trains the students to derive specific information from a passage but it also gives them practice in writing a unified piece of prose about 65-100 words long, in which they have to coordinate and subordinate ideas and/or facts with the "cementing" words provided. Moreover, the students develop good habits regarding punctuation, capitalization, margins, spacing, paragraph indentation, titles. Two 40- to 50-

minute sessions a week following the oral presentation + précis writing format brings in good results. The students who do well in this form of controlled composition transfer the structures and word-order patterns they have practised in précis writing to the freer guided writing they are asked to produce later in the course.[1]

COMPOSITION AT THE SENTENCE LEVEL

Composition at the sentence level, which should be practised throughout the course, is essentially of a preparatory or reinforcement nature aimed at introducing the learners to the selected aspects of language, idioms, and even vocabulary that they are expected to produce later in their guided writing. The exercises, which have recurrent language features, are designed to ease the ESL learners into the writing of continuous prose. They are also integrated with the work the students are already doing, or will be doing shortly, in controlled and guided composition.

Exercises at the sentence level are of two basic types:

A) Expanding the various components of a simple sentence;
B) Combining several simple sentences into one simple, or compound, or complex sentence.

Their purpose is to enable the learners, through the actual use of the language,

- to recognize the basic components of the English sentence: [Qualifying Phrase] - Subject -Verb - Object - [Qualifying Phrase];
- to recognize clauses and phrases;
- to produce sentences with clauses and phrases;
- to expand nouns with modifiers (including -ed and -ing adjectives);

- to expand a noun with adjective phrases before and after it (e.g., a sixty-year-old man, a dark-eyed woman, a man in his forties, a two-bedroom house, a boy wearing blue jeans, etc.);
- to provide specific information on WHERE/WHEN/WHY/HOW by addding suitable clauses, phrases, modifiers of the verb, adverbs and/or expressions of time and place;
- to join several simple sentences into one compound or complex sentence by using connectors such as and, but, or, either...or, neither...nor, both...and, not only...but also, when, while, as soon as, before, after, since, although/though/even though, who, which, whom, whose, where, that (adjective and noun clauses), because, so + adjective/adverb + that, so that.

Illustrated below are tow basic types of exercises that can be devised in order to give the students sufficient practice in the use of the selected aspects of language listed above.

A) Expanding the various components of a simple sentence:

In the exercises involving expanding sentences, the students are asked to add "flesh" to a "skeleton" sentence:

- by expanding the subject and/or the object with
  - adjectives, including -ed and -ing adjectives
  - adjective phrases before and after the noun
  - adjective clauses
- by focusing on WHEN and then adding a suitable time expression or clause
- by focusing on WHERE and then adding a suitable expression of place or a WHERE-clause
- by focusing on HOW and then adding a suitable adverb to modify a verb

- by focusing on WHY and then adding a suitable
  - because-clause (reason)
  - infinitive-phrase (purpose)
  - so that-clause (purpose)

Example of a typical exercise:

A "skeleton" sentence: That boy was crying.

Focus on WHO → [That] three-year-old [boy] in a red sweater
& HOW → [was crying] loudly.

Focus on WHO → [That] three-year-old [boy] in a red sweater
& WHEN → [was crying] { earlier today. / when I saw him an hour ago.

Focus on WHO → [That] three-year-old [boy] in a red sweater
WHEN & WHY → [was crying] a moment ago because his brother hit him.

etc.

B) Combining several sentences into one simple, compound, or complext sentence:

In exercises involving sentence combining, the students are asked to use the selected aspects of language listed on p.6.

Example of a typical exercise focusing on the use of the modifiers of the noun and on word order:

- My sister-in-law gave us a dinnerware set. She is 28 years old.

She lives in Calgary. The set has 40 pieces. It is for eight people. She gave us the set last Christmas.

Answer: Last Christmas my 28-year-old sister-in-law, who lives in Calgary, gave us a 40-piece dinnerware set for eight people.

Example of a typical exercises focusing on coordinating and subordinating ideas within the sentence:

- The teapot was 1/3 off the regular price. The coffee mugs were 1/3 off the regular price. I bought them yesterday. (Both...and/which)

  Answer: Both the teapot and the coffee mugs which I bought yesterday were 1/3 off the regular price.

- My car is in excellent condition. It has four doors. I want to sell my car. I don't really need a car. (which... because)

  Answer: I want to sell my four-door car, which is in excellent condition, because I don't really need a car.

GUIDED COMPOSITION

Guided composition is designed to lead ESL learners to the paragraph levels of "the ordering and arranging of words into proper proportion or relation" (cf. pp. 6-7) so that they will be able to write a unified piece of continuous prose that conveys information on WHO/WHAT/WHERE/WHEN/WHY/HOW in acceptable English. It is also designed to bridge the gap between highly controlled composition on the one hand, and "free" writing on the other.

When supplied with the vocabulary, expressions and idioms needed to

deal linguistically with the composition topic, as well as with specific instructions, students' efforts are directed to the how instead of the what to write. Experience has shown that a four-step approach to guided writing brings good results.

The first step involves preparatory writing at the sentence level, in which the students practice the selected grammar points and vocabulary needed in steps 2, 3 and 4. The language features outlined in the tables on p. 6 are the focus of the various exercises involving expanding or combining sentences. The second step consists of oral preparation: with the help of questions, the students practice orally what they will write later. In their oral work they are expected to use the selected aspects of language and relevant vocabulary to provide information on the five W's and the H. The third step involves the actual writing of the assigned composition in 40-50 minutes with the help of a detailed outline and a vocabulary sheet. The fourth step involves correction of errors, rewriting or combinining sentences and adding clauses if necessary. After their marked compositions are returned, the students correct their mistakes with the help of a correction symbols key. Individual consultation with the teacher is encouraged. Finally, with the corrected and revised composition, the students also submit the original draft marked by the teacher.

NOTES

1. For a detailed discussion of teaching approaches, and for a detailed outline of the objectives, see L.G. Alexander, "Introduction to the Teacher," in Practice and Progress, pp. vii-xvii, and L.G. Alexander and E.T. Cornelius, Exercises in Comprehension and Composition, pp. 20-22, 45-47.

APPENDIX:

SOME AIDS TO THE ESL TEACHER

Written by specialists in the field of English as a second language as practical guides for very advanced ESL learners and their teachers, the

dictionaries and grammars listed below provide a comprehensive description of English usage and sentence structure as well as a very detailed examination of individual grammar points. Since they concentratre on major grammatical problems most commonly encountered by ESL students and offer many features normally not found in dictionaries and grmmars written for the native speaker of English, they are valuable reference tools.

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